

The Setting

As the battleground for a rural guerrilla movement, Bolivia appears to be an ideal setting. Geographically, the country is split by ranges of the Andes mountains into sharply different areas of varying altitudes and topography which make land communications especially difficult for conventional security forces. The southeastern part of the country in which the guerrillas chose to operate is sparsely populated, roads are few and far between, and the terrain, with its narrow, shrub-shrouded stream and river beds as the main travel routes, is ideal for ambushes. Bolivia would also be an excellent base for international guerrilla operations since it borders relatively uninhabited areas of five other Latin American nations: Brazil, Paraguay, Peru, Argentina and Chile.

Socially and economically Bolivia also seems to satisfy the conditions for a communist insurgency effort. It has one of the lowest levels of per capita income in Latin America. The social and economic standards of Bolivian miners and peasants--campesinos--remain miserably low despite the radical economic and social changes brought about by the 1952 Revolution. The growing discontent of the miners has resulted in recurring clashes with government forces in the past few years. And much of the Aymara and Quechua speaking peasant population remain generally in the same isolated state of poverty that they have occupied for centuries.

Perhaps most important from the point of view of those favoring revolutions is the fragility and instability of the Bolivian political system with its violently conflicting forces, its tendency toward violent change of government, and its highly transitory political support patterns. Any regime in power is thus particularly vulnerable to the efforts of a relatively small group of dedicated insurrectionists. Even before the emergence of a guerrilla movement in early 1967, the military-oriented regime of President Barrientos was already unpopular with the miners and various other labor groups due to its efforts to stabilize the economy and restrict the power of the leftist labor unions. The regime was obviously heavily dependent for its support on the ill-trained, ill-equipped and generally ill-regarded military forces. Thus the defeat or humiliation of the military at the hands of a small group of guerrillas could have a devastating effect upon the stability of the government.

In this setting of a backward isolated country, beset by deep-rooted economic and social problems and ruled by a somewhat shaky government, the guerrillas, under the leadership of Latin America's leading guerrilla tactician, Argentine revolutionary Ernesto "Che" Guevara, began developing their base of operations in late 1966.

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The Guerrilla Victories

The hard core of the guerrilla band consisted of Guevara and, at their peak strength, some 15 Cuban and other foreign revolutionaries, several veterans of Cuba's Sierra Maestra campaign, as well as Cuban-trained Bolivian communists. The first of the group moved into an area north of the town of Camiri in south-eastern Bolivia in November 1966. Their initial purpose apparently was to develop a well-trained and well-disciplined force that would be capable of harassing or engaging elements of the Bolivian army perhaps by September or October 1967. Purchasing a farm as a logistical base, they moved north into the rugged, virtually unpopulated region of brush, stream beds, and canyons to familiarize themselves with the terrain. They were well equipped with automatic weapons, communications equipment (including short wave facilities for contact with Cuba) and medical supplies. They divided their force into vanguard, center, and rearguard; established various base camps, guard posts, and hidden arms and supplies caches; and set off on reconnaissance patrols.

The first real indication of the movement's existence came in early March when two Bolivians who had briefly joined the guerrillas deserted and were arrested by authorities when they tried to sell a rifle stolen from the guerrilla camp. Still, their tale about the band and its Cuban leadership was viewed with considerable scepticism by many. However, on March 23, a patrol of Bolivian soldiers stumbled upon a section of the guerrilla force and were quickly beaten in a sharp firefight that left seven Bolivian soldiers dead and many more wounded and captured.

The government now took the threat of a communist guerrilla movement more seriously. Additional army patrols were sent into the area--with disastrous results. The untrained, poorly-equipped conscripts were consistently routed by the seemingly invincible guerrillas. Taunting voices called from the brush and the Bolivian troops often dropped their antiquated weapons and fled. The low morale of the Bolivian army, undermined by its purge following the 1952 Revolution and almost traditionally low because of its rather dismal list of defeats which had cost Bolivia large portions of its territory, fell even further, particularly among the enlisted men. The guerrillas meanwhile appeared to grow in confidence and strength. In July, they boldly occupied the town of Samaipata for a day and disarmed the military unit stationed there.

The guerrillas attempted to build popular support for their cause. Now called the National Liberation Army (at least by Radio Havana), they went to considerable effort to win the backing of the campesinos in the area. When commandeering food or

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supplies from local residents, they paid more than the market price for the goods. Several of the guerrillas were doctors, and they treated the children of the villages in an effort to win over the populace.

In late April, French marxist theoretician Jules Regis Debray was captured after he had visited the guerrilla camp for several weeks and the guerrilla effort attracted significant international attention. Debray's statements that the guerrilla band was led and supported by Cubans and other professional Latin American guerrillas and might be under the direction of "Che" Guevara underscored the seriousness of the threat. In the eyes of many who believed Guevara was really leading the guerrillas, "Che" vs. the Bolivian army seemed to be more than an equal contest.

Increasingly alarmed, the Bolivian Government sought help from the US and some of its neighbors--Argentina, Brazil, and Peru. In response, the US provided a counter-insurgency training program for the Bolivian Second Ranger Battalion, which moved into the guerrilla zone in September 1967. The US also supplied some relatively modern automatic weapons and other equipment to the Bolivian army.

As the guerrilla movement continued to rack up successes in its encounters with the Bolivian army, other dissident elements in Bolivia agitated against the government. Opposition parties criticized the Barrientos' regime for its inept handling of the insurgency problem. In June, miners of the Catavi-Siglo XX tin mine urged solidarity with the guerrilla force. When the government sent in troops to put down the miners' revolt, at least 16 miners were killed. The government outlawed the various Bolivian communist parties (pro-Soviet, pro-Chinese, and Trotskyite).

The importance or potential of the guerrilla movement was not lost on Bolivia's neighbors. Argentina, Paraguay, Peru, and to a lesser degree Brazil began to consider what steps they might take to prevent a communist takeover in Bolivia which would threaten their borders. Patrols in areas of Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay contiguous to the Bolivian guerrilla zone were increased and Argentina and Peru discussed the possibility of sending troops to assist the Bolivian Army in putting down the insurgency. Paraguay and Argentina planned anti-guerrilla maneuvers near the Bolivian border and Bolivia received some material assistance from Argentina and Brazil.

The Guerrilla Defeat

By July, however, the situation began to improve. Some guerrillas were killed or captured as the Bolivian forces began

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to hold their ground in clashes with the insurgents. The Bolivian army discovered one of the base camps of the guerrillas and captured many documents, including photographs of an individual among the guerrillas who bore a striking resemblance to "Che" Guevara. Two falsified passports were found which carried the thumb prints of Guevara. These documents helped build the government's case for charges of Cuban intervention in Bolivian affairs, which it effectively presented at the Twelfth Meeting of Foreign Ministers of the OAS in September.

The government's first major military victory against the guerrillas occurred on August 31, when the rear guard section was ambushed by a Bolivian army unit while trying to cross the Rio Grande. Nine of the 10 guerrillas were killed, including three Cubans, a Peruvian, and several Bolivians, among them militant Bolivian communist Moises Guevara. The Bolivian troops suffered no casualties in the ambush, which resulted from a combination of good luck and good planning. The success buoyed the morale of the troops considerably. During September, a guerrilla support ring was broken up by the authorities in La Paz on the basis of captured guerrilla documents. And on September 26, another clash with the guerrillas left several dead, including prominent Cuban and Bolivian guerrilla leaders.

In late September, the US-trained Second Ranger Battalion was committed to the guerrilla zone. Its first victory was the most spectacular of the campaign and probably marked the end of the present guerrilla movement in Bolivia. On October 8 the Rangers clashed with the main body of the guerrilla band. Some seven guerrillas, including "Che" Guevara, fell in the battle.

Latest reports indicate that only a handful of guerrillas--perhaps fewer than a dozen--now remain, and these are trying to escape from the guerrilla zone. They have reportedly forced local residents to accompany them as guides in an effort to break out of the area.

The Cause of Defeat

In retrospect, several errors on the part of the guerrillas become evident. The guerrillas seemed wedded to the thesis of rural guerrilla revolution as described in Debray's book, Revolution Within the Revolution?, a romanticized and greatly oversimplified synthesis of the Castro success story. In this thesis, the revolution must have its main thrust and authority in the rural guerrilla movement, to which will be drawn an increasing number of patriotic followers. Formal association with the traditional communist parties is to be avoided as the guerrilla revolutionary process will produce its own political leaders. The local campesino population will be won over and will support the

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guerrillas as the liberators from government (imperialist) oppression.

The failure of the campesino to support the movement was critical. Conservative, wary of outsiders, many owning their own land, they were not openly hostile toward the guerrillas, but they did not support the guerrilla cause. Moreover, they frequently reported the presence of guerrillas to the authorities and sometimes acted as guides for the army. In Guevara's diary, captured in the October 8 clash, he reportedly comments on the difficulty he had in reaching the campesinos with his revolutionary message.

From the beginning, a lack of coordination between the guerrillas and the city-based communist parties was evident. Both the pro-Soviet and pro-Chinese communist parties publicly endorsed the guerrilla effort, but there were splits within the party as to the degree of actual support that should be rendered the guerrillas. There was also some resentment that the movement was Cuban rather than Bolivian-led and directed. Talk of urban terrorism or the opening of other guerrilla fronts--moves which would have seriously strained the government's ability to contend with the insurrection--came to naught. Nor was it ever evident that the guerrillas in fact desired such cooperation, committed as they were to the thesis that they themselves were the only force from which the revolution could evolve. The same lack of coordination was evident with respect to other dissident elements on whom the guerrillas might have called for assistance if they had wanted to--the miners, the students, the urban employed. Of course the quick and surprisingly effective crack-down on the miners in June may have tended to discourage efforts by either the guerrillas or their prospective allies in this direction.

Another error, recognized as a weakness by "Che" himself, lay in the dominant role assumed by the Cubans in the movement. Not only did this breed some resentment among Bolivian communists but it made efforts to win the support and confidence of the campesinos all the more difficult. It also provided the Bolivian Government with ammunition to undermine the guerrilla cause by playing on the Bolivians' extreme sense of nationalism. Even those Bolivian dissidents who might have been prone to join the movement in its more successful days were probably resentful of the foreign coloration of the band. President Barrientos repeated this theme constantly during the anti-guerrilla campaign--Cuba, itself a puppet of a foreign power (the USSR) was now seeking to extend its control over Bolivians. Thus the movement, to Bolivians and outsiders as well, appeared less and less home-grown, less the product of injustice and poverty than an aggressive adventure set upon by a foreign government. As this

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point was driven home, much of the romantic mystique of the guerrillas was lost.

Without the help of the peasants to protect and support them (particularly with food which was always in short supply) and limited to a single force in a single area, the movement was doomed. Even the lackluster Bolivian army forces stationed in the area could eventually contain and destroy the band since, after all, they outnumbered the guerrillas twenty or thirty to one.

The Effect on Bolivia

With the destruction of the present guerrilla movement and the demise of "Che" Guevara, the Bolivians and particularly their military forces are currently enjoying a rare sense of self-confidence and pride. Bolivian leaders have themselves publicly displayed surprise over their victory. In the past few months, during the period of various successful encounters with the guerrillas, President Barrientos has been spared some of the criticism and plotting of the non-communist opposition. However, these traditional internal problems can be expected to resume as the bloom of the victory fades. Still, there is no doubt that Barrientos' domestic position and popularity has been greatly strengthened, and he is now pictured not only as a defender of the nation against external threat but as a defender of the southern hemisphere as well. To emphasize this point, Barrientos is now talking about the need for military action to rid the hemisphere of the Castro threat. The success will also strengthen Barrientos' key element of support, the armed forces. But a revitalized, newly self-confident military force may also be less subject to tight presidential control. Also it will probably deal more harshly with other dissident groups who might actively threaten the government, particularly the miners. Some of the officers who were directly involved in the anti-guerrilla operations reportedly see themselves as the true saviors of the nation, rather than those who sat on high in La Paz and issued orders. They are comparing themselves to the Chaco War (1932-35) veterans who were to subsequently pave the way for the Bolivian revolution. There are, for example, rumors that Colonel Zenteno, Commander of the Eighth Army Division which participated in the anti-guerrilla campaign, may be named Foreign Minister, partly as a reward for his services.

The failure of the guerrillas and the death of Guevara are of course serious blows to the extreme left. These defeats will probably strengthen the position of the more "moderate" elements

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of the communist parties which opposed the guerrilla movement as rash adventurism or opposed its foreign leadership.

However, the basic problems that make Bolivia a target for communist insurgency efforts, be it rural or urban based, have not really changed. Poverty, backwardness, unemployment and inherent political instability may have been momentarily forgotten, but they are still there. The miners are still a potential source of agitation, the students remain volatile, and the political plotters and opportunists continue to seek power by any means. The defeat of a communist insurgency effort does not alter this, and a new movement, perhaps under the banner of the "martyred" Guevara but adopting tactics more suitable to the Bolivian situation, cannot be ruled out.

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